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# The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 73 MARCH 19TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

Dr. Oldham warned you last week that I was going to be responsible for the next two issues of the News-Letter, in order that he might take a short holiday. You must therefore blame me for any deficiencies in them. I am sure you will approve if I begin by taking the opportunity, which is afforded by the Editor's momentary absence, to thank him here on behalf of us all for what he is doing for us week by week through the News-Letter and to assure him of our prayers that God will give him health and strength to continue and develop the work.

## A MINING VILLAGE

I was recently invited to preach at a mining village in North Wales—Llay near Wrexham; and I was quite excited by what I saw there. Since it bears upon matters that have frequently been discussed in the News-Letter, I pass my impressions on to you. I don't think I am prone to take too rosy a view of the opportunity of Christians for constructive action at the present time, but what I saw at Llay convinced me that there are at any rate some situations where the answer to the question "What can we *do*?" need not be in doubt. It is true that the conditions there are peculiarly favourable, but that in itself is of general interest. For we need to work for the production of favourable conditions, and not merely to consider how we can make the best of bad jobs. Llay is a village of about 4,000 souls ; it was a mere hamlet until about 25 years ago when the colliery was opened. Not only is the mine constructed and managed on the best available technical lines ; but the village has been planned so that the houses radiate in pleasant avenues from a large central place where there are already schools, a church, clubs and a public garden, and there is room still available for further communal buildings. There is no need to mark the contrast between this and most of the mining villages in different parts of our country.

What struck me here particularly was not only the opportunity that such a village has of becoming a real community, but the beginnings that have already been made. The feature of main interest and of chief promise so far is the boys' club. Eighty-five per cent. of the lads in the village between 14 and 20 years of age (i.e., nearly 200) not only belong to it, but spend all their leisure time either in the club or in activities connected with it. I was greatly impressed by the spirit which pervades this club, by the way in which a solution of the 14—20 problem is being practically achieved for this whole community, and not least by the keen desire which these boys already have to make their village a place in which—not heroes but—ordinary men, women and children may live full and creative lives. Some of them are already thinking out, and eagerly discussing, what they will do, when they are fathers of families, to remedy the defects which are

obvious, for instance, in the home life of the place. For so far it is chiefly the young people, and not the adults, who have been fired by the vision of a local Christian community. The boys' club, which is thus the key to the situation, has the immense advantage of a full time club leader who knows what he is about. He has been there for only two years, but has already enabled the boys not only to run the club and all its activities themselves, but also to see for themselves what a responsibility they have for the future development of the whole village community.

As regards religion, here too his method has been not to impose rules, but to elicit interest and resolution. Thus he began with a very free and easy bible class on Sundays in the club itself, but after a time the boys themselves asked to have instead a service once a month in the church, and now he is more apprehensive of their becoming too " churchy " than of the reverse. The curate-in-charge of the church too is refreshingly free from a sense of frustration. He finds so much evangelistic and pastoral work to do that he finds himself wishing that every day were twice as long as it is.

Last but not least, I was told that the average number of children in each family is five; nor do I think that these boys, when the time comes, will go in for family restriction. There is no question about their will to live.

## A POSITIVE FAITH

Among the letters lately addressed to Dr. Oldham is one which modesty would prevent him from reproducing, but from which I am free to quote. The writer expresses his enthusiastic appreciation of Dr. Oldham's recent broadcast talks, and continues as follows :

" It seems to me desperately important that such affirmations as you made shall be made for England as a whole and be broadcast to the people of Europe including and especially the Germans. These latter will never acknowledge our claim to responsible leadership until we proclaim such a position or Weltanschauung which not only reflects our stirrings of conscience but prompts theirs. The inability of our Government to expound a positive faith and standpoint—apart from the old rather whitewashed phrases about freedom, justice, fair-play, etc.—is surely crippling the force of British propaganda. Knowing Germany extremely well I can measure the disdain with which ninety-nine per cent. of our criticism must be received among thoughtful circles. They will say that it is wholly negative and outmoded, that it stresses ethical values but ignores cultural ones. We can never get away with it by setting up ourselves as ethical moralists and magistrates in Europe. Such an attitude will always provoke resentment and bitterness. However justified our condemnations we must realize that the only way of achieving a true hearing from our present enemies is to abandon the attitude of self-righteousness, and to treat our adversaries and ourselves on equal terms. Once we do this fairly and squarely we shall be in a very strong position indeed. For, the Nazi leaders apart, there are vast numbers of seriously-minded Germans, ardent patriots, who are susceptible to profound argument and will be unsettled by it.

" If the Government cannot be persuaded at the present time to adopt such measures —and perhaps there is no spokesman really capable of them in its ranks—possibly the Churches could do so. Perhaps the right time will be after the failure of the spring assault on these islands and their communications, when the Germans will be frustrated and disillusioned. But meanwhile every possible means should be utilized to impregnate the minds of our own people with the ideas you so grandly and simply expressed. And we should make it increasingly clear to the peoples of the United States what *we* mean by the defence of democracy. There is some danger that a false identity of aims may be accepted by them and by us."

## RE-ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH RESOURCES

Few people probably realize how far ministers and Church officials are inhibited from breaking fresh ground by the material conditions under which they have to work. Commenting on what was said in C.N-L. No. 66 about the reorganization of Church resources the following paragraphs from a letter from a vicar in the Midlands raise questions of far-reaching importance.

" The Christian News-Letter No. 66 draws attention to the very important and at the same time very difficult problems connected with the reorganization of Church resources. It might be of value to collect and analyse individual comment on this subject in order to see whether there is any consensus of opinion on the direction which future policy should take. What follows here has been written with this idea in mind.

" The conviction grows upon the writer, after twenty years in the ministry (and a traditionalist by temperament), that so far as the human organization of the Church is concerned, the present legal and material burdens under which it labours constitute some of the greatest obstacles to its spiritual progress. The bombing of our cities and the ruthless obliteration of a good deal of slum property will undoubtedly force reforms in this direction at a pace which would have seemed impossible two years ago. It may be that the Luftwaffe is destined to perform the same service for the Church, drastic though it is. Our minds revolt at the wanton destruction of the beautiful, the historic, the archaeological and architectural treasures enshrined in many of our devastated churches. But the thing is done. Perhaps it is a startling way to bring home to us the fact that the Church is spending far too much time, energy and money on bricks and mortar, while true spiritual work makes little noticeable progress.

" I submit that the question of rebuilding churches, as churches, (i.e. for purposes of worship and devotion) should not be considered on a parochial basis, nor should it be considered in the light of reinstating something which has been destroyed. We cannot but deplore the destruction of ancient landmarks and historical associations, but God is not a God of the dead but of the living. Quite apart from the question as to whether it would be in the best interests of ecclesiastical art to reconstruct replicas of ancient churches, or whether such buildings would ever have the same appeal as the originals, one cannot help feeling that such a policy would typify the delusion which persists in many minds that after this war all things will continue as they were from the beginning. In many cases it would certainly be construed as a useless attempt to rekindle the dead ashes of spiritual fires on hearths which are no longer spiritual homes.

" The destruction of many churches may effectively open our eyes to the extent to which spiritual progress is being hindered by material commitments ; perhaps an actual example may illustrate the point I am trying to make. This is a typical parish of 10,000 people, no better or worse than many another. It is a dormitory for an entirely artisan population, and has been so far spared the attention of the bombers. There are five other religious meeting houses besides the church to provide for the needs of the usual small proportion of people who go to church or chapel at all. So far as I can judge by records, the church is as flourishing now as at any time in its hundred years of existence. Twenty would be a good average of Sunday communicants, 50 to 70 in the evening congregation, and £3 a week a high average income. Bear these figures in mind, and then consider that this small body has to try to maintain a church (in the worst Victorian taste) which will hold 400 ; a parish hall ; an old schoolmaster's house ; and (by the incumbent) an extravagant vicarage. At a modest estimate, you can say that there is £18,000 of property to be kept in order, repaired, cleaned, heated, lighted, for a handful of people who might easily be accommodated in a good-sized room. It is easy to see what *must* be the greatest preoccupation of the incumbent and the Church Council. Add to this the psychological

problem—that of arousing the enthusiasm and sense of corporate fellowship among a few individuals scattered about in a half-warmed church meant to hold 400, and the vicious circle is complete.

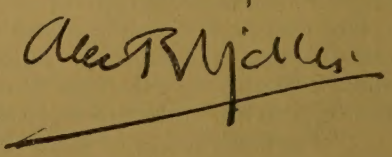
" What I am seeking is a way of escape from a situation which, as things are at present in many places, seems to be dominated by the overwhelming incubus of ' maintenance.' I believe I could get a more effective response if I were free from all this ' paraphernalia ' of religion. Instead of producing something with the machine, we seem to be caught up in the belt which keeps the wheels going round and round."

The letter naturally envisages the problem from the point of view of the Church of England. But it is to be hoped that in any impending reorganization the plans of all the Churches will be co-ordinated as far as possible. In the mission field overseas arrangements are now increasingly being made to obviate overlapping, etc., and some corresponding arrangements are overdue in this country. A travelling Missioner of the Methodist Church recently recorded this incident : ' In a Cheshire village we arrived to find a Mirfield Brother conducting a Mission at the Anglican church : our suggestion that we should unite for one service was eagerly welcomed. Picture this scene—a glorious October Sunday afternoon : forty Methodists set out to form a procession of witness through the village ; on reaching the main road we are gladdened by the sight of our Anglican friends in about equal numbers, with their Missioner, marching along to meet us—headed by the symbol of our common Faith. For an hour we joined in worship and praise and witness. It was a very real means of grace to us all and made an unforgettable impact on the whole neighbourhood."

In what ways can the spirit of this incident be more widely and enduringly applied?

In Staunton Harold church (Leics.) there is an inscription which reads: "In the year 1653 when all things sacred were throughout the nation destroyed or profaned, this church was built to the glory of God by Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet, whose singular praise it was to have done the best things in the worst times and hoped for them in the most calamitous."[1]

Yours sincerely,



[1] I have derived the last two pieces of information from the current bulletin of the " Methodist Sacramental Fellowship " (Court Lodge, Fawkham, Kent).

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER, ARLOSH HALL, MANSFIELD ROAD, OXFORD.

Published by Dr. J. H. Oldham for the Council on the Christian Faith and the Common Life and printed by the Kemp Hall Press, Ltd., in the City of Oxford.